

FCM Sustainable Community Awards 2011 Winner – Planning

City of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories
Population: 19,000



The plan prioritizes green space and waterfront revitalization
Credit: City of Yellowknife, Bob Wilson

Smart Growth Development Plan

Summary

With funding support from federal, provincial and municipal partners, the City of Yellowknife undertook a plan to integrate sustainable planning principles into its long-term growth and development. The planning process involved extensive public consultation with over 2,000 residents, tackling such issues as urban design, land use, preservation of natural areas, transportation, economic development and energy use. Initially, the plan focused on four key areas of the city most in need of revitalization, with broader, city-wide expansion to follow. The plan consists of seven background reports, along with a Recommendations Report which contains fifteen detailed implementation strategies to address environmental, social and economic concerns.

The city expects the plan and its strategies to improve the environmental character of the community through brownfield redevelopment, protection of environmentally sensitive areas, expansion of community gardens and green spaces, implementation of green development standards and the improvement of transit and pedestrian infrastructure. The plan also supports community's social and cultural fabric by outlining collaborative work with First Nations groups. Furthermore, it aims to improve the city's economic situation through a mix of tax incentives, targeted investments and neighbourhood revitalization initiatives.

Background

Yellowknife was named capital of the Northwest Territories in 1967, and is now home to about 20,000 people. The city is situated on the shores of Great Slave Lake, about 500 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle, within the traditional hunting area of the Dogrib First Nation. Since the discovery of gold on the shores of Yellowknife Bay in 1934, minerals and natural resources have dramatically affected the city's economic development. Gold mining operations continued until 2003, and following the discovery of diamonds in 1991, three diamond mines now operate in the area.

Yellowknife's northern geography, coupled with complex historical, political and resource-related issues, presents unique community development challenges. Land use and development strategies have had to contend with issues such as abandoned mine sites, First Nations land claims and a history of urban sprawl. In response to increasing development pressures, the city chose to focus on four districts that it believed offered the greatest potential for community revitalization and environmental benefits — Downtown, Old Town, Old Airport Road and Tin Can Hill/Con Mine.

The broader objective of the Smart Growth Development Plan was to create a long-range development vision based on 'smart growth' principles. In doing so, the city wanted to look beyond the traditional five-year scope of an Official Community Plan, instead focusing on a 50-year vision. This longer horizon was recommended by a recently completed Community Energy Plan.

Project Development

The project relied on funding support from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' (FCM) Green Municipal Fund™, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Government of the Northwest Territories and several private sector partners. The plan's comprehensive scope and long-term vision required a high level of consultation with all municipal departments. This consultation took the form of both weekly directors' meetings and targeted sessions between the project team and specific departments. As the project team was often dispersed in various locations, the city relied heavily on online collaboration tools and conference calls.

Since project inception, a Smart Growth Development Plan committee has provided input to and championed the plan in the community. The committee consists of 15 members, representing groups such as the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce, Yellowknives Dene First Nation, Ecology North and the Yellowknife Seniors' Society. The entire development process strove to incorporate the opinions and ideas of the public through multiple tools and activities. In total, more than 2,000 residents provided input to the plan at various stages, through a questionnaire survey, focus group sessions, a transportation origin/destination survey, a Design Yellowknife community charrette and the use of MetroQuest growth modeling software, which allowed participants to visualize growth scenarios and the impacts of decisions in real time.

Project Implementation

It took three years for Yellowknife to implement the Smart Growth Development Plan, as the city wanted to build understanding and acceptance of sustainable development principles among residents by pursuing a thorough consultation process. The community leveraged external expertise in this area by participating in several FCM programs, such as the Partners for Climate Protection (PCP) program, capacity building webinars, the Sustainable Communities Conference and Mission, a brownfield redevelopment workshop and through the Green Municipal Fund (GMF). The project also benefitted from the funding support of multiple partners, allowing the city to plan in a more integrated manner. This helped to avoid the typical 'silo' effect, commonly caused by completing solitary plan components one at a time as budgets allow.

Available resources allowed for all the design and planning professions (planners, engineers, architects and landscape architects) to engage in the project. This diverse project team undertook a public consultation process in which each step allowed for testing assumptions and building on ideas from earlier stages, all while engaging as many citizens as possible. This coordinated approach also demonstrated the importance of integrated planning and decision-making, providing a long-term best practice for the city.

The different consultation stages produced a number of ideas and recommendations, which the project team then explored and evaluated in greater detail. The team forwarded the best of these on to the Plan committee, who reviewed and integrated them. City directors from across the various departments reviewed all the committee's recommendations and reports before they were presented to City Council for ultimate approval. The consultations also produced a series of seven background reports which, in turn, were instrumental to producing a comprehensive Recommendations Report. The report's 15 implementation strategies address a range of environmental, social and economic issues. Environmental recommendations included investments in transit infrastructure, promoting active transportation, incentives for energy-efficient buildings and brownfield redevelopment, remediating former mine sites, establishing residential density targets and developing community gardens. In the social arena, recommendations addressed affordable housing, heritage preservation, public art programs and greater collaboration with First Nations on planning projects. From an economic perspective, the report identified business tax incentives for neighbourhood revitalization, the establishment of a Northern Science and Technology Centre and sustainable infrastructure investments. The report also included tools and metrics to measure progress, such as a system for evaluating environmentally sensitive areas and criteria for various land use designations.

The smart growth principles laid out in the plan are intended to guide all development decisions in the city. The plan has already impacted the direction of Yellowknife's Strategic Plan, adopted in late 2010, and will provide policy direction for the General Plan, which is due to be completed in 2011. The plan's recommendations will also guide significant changes to the city's Zoning Bylaw over the next several years, as well as the establishment of new committees to oversee priority areas. All of the background and summary reports were shared with the public through various media. They remain available on the city's website and, though tailored to Yellowknife's specific context, have served as models for other communities conducting integrated sustainability planning.

Results

- The plan generated a Development Incentive Program Bylaw to encourage energy-efficient buildings, brownfield remediation, residential density and heritage preservation. There have also been positive amendments to the Land Administration Bylaw and the city is pursuing amendments to the Zoning Bylaw.
- Affordable housing is promoted through the introduction of a non-market housing framework and an Affordable Housing Strategy.
- LEED® Silver has become the minimum development standard for all new municipal buildings.
- Two former mine sites within city limits are being considered for remediation and redevelopment and the city is evaluating the potential for using heat from the former Con Mine as part of a community energy system for buildings in the downtown core.
- The plan's recommendations will improve community well-being through the preservation of green spaces, the incorporation of community gardens and the presence of active transportation options in neighbourhoods throughout the city. A \$2 million capital project has begun on Old Airport Road to promote active transportation.
- The city has strengthened its relationships with local First Nations communities.
- Downtown and Old Town revitalization initiatives have been undertaken, including a new eco-housing project.

Lessons Learned

- EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SUPPORT IS CRITICAL THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS. In addition to the funding provided by government and private sector partners, it was crucial to have both an internal and external team committed to the project for several years. It was also essential to have a City Council member to champion the project and maintain momentum and focus.
- PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IS THE KEY TO CHALLENGING SKEPTICISM. Prior to the Smart Growth Plan, many groups and individuals in the city were strong advocates for a certain type of growth and development — one that supported and subsidized suburban greenfield development. According to Jeffrey Humble, director of planning and development, “it is a significant challenge to change this mindset when so many ideas, policies and programs are built around it.” The iterative consultation process, and especially the use of MetroQuest and the community design charrette, was effective at challenging public perceptions.
- TAKE THE TIME TO DO IT RIGHT. Development of the plan took longer than expected, but this time was needed to ensure adequate public input. According to Mr. Humble, authentic public engagement was the cornerstone of the process and, given the incredible amounts of information generated by the consulting team, more time was needed for the community to digest the material and provide comments. “While certain components could have been fast-tracked,” he noted, “it would not have been beneficial to the process.”

Related and Future Initiatives

As a result of the plan, Yellowknife expects to make significant changes to its Zoning Bylaw over the next several years, as well as to the Land Administration Bylaw which regulates the location and direction of development and investment in the municipality. The plan's recommendations and principles will influence the policy direction of Yellowknife's General Plan, due to be developed in 2011. The 50-year horizon of the Smart Growth Development Plan ensures that these principles will continue to guide decision making and development in the city for years to come.

Partners and Collaboration

Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce
Yellowknives Dene First Nation
Ecology North
Yellowknife Seniors' Society
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Government of the Northwest Territories – Education, Culture and Employment

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